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INDIVIDUALIZED LANGUAGE ARTS, WHY NOT.

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THE LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM CAN BE INDIVIDUALIZED BY ANY TEACHER WHOSE PUPILS HAVE ACQUIRED CERTAIN BASIC SKILLS IN READING AND WRITING. WORKING WITHIN ONE LARGE BLOCK OF TIME DAILY, THE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER FIRST ENSURES THE PROVISION OF WORTHWHILE INDEPENDENT ACTIVITIES WHICH WILL STIMULATE THE CHILDREN'S INTEREST AND FREE HIM TO GIVE INDIVIDUAL AND SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION. THE CHILDREN THEN ACCOMPLISH SPELLING, COMPOSITION, AND SIMILARLY-RELATED ASSIGNMENTS AT THEIR OWN RATES AND LEVELS. THROUGH INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES WITH STUDENTS, THE TEACHER FORMS FLUID GROUPS OF STUDENTS WITH SIMILAR DEFICIENCES AND TEACHES ACCORDINGLY, DISBANDING THE GROUPS WHEN THE SKILLS ARE ATTAINED. IN THE INDIVIDUALIZED READING PROGRAM, CHILDREN SELECT THEIR OWN BOOKS, READ AT THEIR OWN PACE, KEEP THEIR OWN RECORDS, AND SHARE THEIR READING WITH CLASSMATES THROUGH A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES. THESE SHARING ACTIVITIES LEAD INTO INDIVIDUALIZING A BALANCED PROGRAM OF ORAL AND WRITING SKILLS FOR BOTH PRACTICAL AND PERSONAL NEEDS. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "DELAWARE ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 2, NO. 1, SPRING, 1967. (MM)

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TE 000 122

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SPRING 1967

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Individualized Language Arts? Why Not!

THE WORD "individualized" has been bandied about ad nauseam, but even in the near-vacuum of research evidence and of positive knowledge about the learning-teaching process, we are fairly certain that learning takes place when there is adequate feedback or knowledge of results. Ideally this feedback should contain definite information concerning the individual child's own errors received in a one-to-one relationship with the teacher. This is the advantage of the private school's small classes. Realistically, the unit count is not going to be reduced in the public school system in the near future, and the widespread use of organizational changes to facilitate small group instruction such as team teaching is still around the corner. In thousands of classrooms children are still arranged in rows or groups while a teacher instructs the group as a whole, and all work from the same book at the same time in complete defiance of our awareness of ranges of ability in any group, no matter how homogeneously they may have been sorted out. A program such as team teaching with the additional personnel and flexible scheduling will be an excellent answer to the problem of individualizing instruction, but it requires administrative authority for additional funds and changes in staff use. Yet, individualized instruction *can* be done *now*, and it can be done practically and effectively by any teacher with careful use of independent activities.

In the areas of language arts in the elementary school, it is possible and sensible to use an individualized approach to learning with children who have acquired certain basic skills in reading and writing. This can be done not only in the well-publicized area of reading, but also in the areas of writing, speaking, and listening. To bypass the sterility of most single texts in language arts, it is feasible to organize a classroom into an independently operating unit where all children are given blocks of work in spelling, composition, research, oral communication, etc., which they manipulate to their own satisfaction and at their own level of

TE000 122

achievement. As all children are working independently on projects, the teacher is free to give individual and small group instruction. More learning can be accomplished if a child and a teacher sit down together in a conference for a few minutes to discuss that child's own work than can ever be done in a traditional program.

In the past the problems of individualizing class instruction with thirty or more children have appeared to be impossible to solve. With the introduction of individualized reading programs (self-selection), techniques used in this method of teaching reading have proved very successful, and can be transferred to any other curriculum area. In fact, the first prerequisite of individualizing instruction is to set up worthwhile independent activities that will vitalize the children's interest and require little attention on the part of the teacher. This leaves the teacher free to devote a large block of time to individual conferences and small group instruction in basic skills.

And *how* can this be done?

"This" can be accomplished by giving a large block of time for language arts classes—equivalent to that usually required for Reading and English subject matter classes in a departmentalized program. The class thus has a long uninterrupted time with the Language Arts teacher who is responsible for all communication skills. (This is, of course, readily accomplished in the self-contained classroom.)

INDIVIDUALIZED READING

The program is, first of all, based on an individualized reading program, using trade or library books but no basal readers. Each child selects his own book in special free library time slots, in addition to regular library classes, and keeps his own record of books read with short comments on each book. Reading levels are determined at the beginning of the year by spelling and informal inventories, and through individual conferences the children's skill needs are determined. This reading program has a high interest level and the children are motivated to read independently for pleasure. Small groups of children revealing need for common skills are worked with until the need of a group is satisfied, and then that group is disbanded. Children engage in book sharing—skits, puppet plays, chalk talks, TV shows, bulletin board displays, etc.—to advertise a particular book to the remainder of the class. In this way children become familiar with a wide selection of readings. The children increase their reading skills by constant, absorbing practice—in reading.

INDIVIDUALIZED WRITING

When children are established in the reading program, the writing program of individualized instruction is set up simultaneously through channels of practical and personal writing. It may take one year for the teacher to become adept at individualized reading before taking the next step. The entire group is instructed in skills of notetaking, outlining, and writing of a "research" paper. This is done in separate units based on a topic of interest to the child and selected by him. This format can also be used for social studies and science reports, and these reports can also be written in the Language Arts classes. Several short practice reports may be done before attempting a long "research" report. This could require several months, broken down into components of notetaking, outlining, rough drafts (corrected by teacher and student), and final finished report. All of this work is done independently after initial group instruction. When children encounter difficulty, the teacher assists. She is constantly helping children and checking their individual work.

The librarian is of invaluable assistance in the individualized program—a library is a must. Free library periods should be allowed for selecting and returning library books and for children to do reference work. The librarian works closely with the Language Arts teacher, and the children become familiar with the library and with a wide variety of reference materials.

In addition to practical writing of many varieties, done with correction and instruction, the children write at least one story per week for personal writing. These stories are kept by the children in a personal folder and are *not* corrected. Writing will improve by frequent, highly motivated writing experiences; and, in the subjectivity of personal writing, encouragement and praise further the improvement far more than the blue pencil. The stories are read silently by the teacher and orally by the children to the class—on a voluntary basis. This is one of the highest motivating forces for writing—writing for an audience. Composition may be motivated by literary models, tall tales, classic stories, poems, etc., and, in any event, children write better about objective subjects rather than subjective ones. For example, personal writing may be initiated by any of the following suggestions after a period of introduction and discussion:

1. A story about a picture—have five or more on display
2. A story about a comic strip
3. Cartoons—to portray a story

4. Writing instructions for making a diagram so that others may draw it from these instructions
5. Discussing assigned topics in groups and then writing about them
6. Writing beginning suspenseful sentences for stories
7. Writing surprise endings
8. Tall tales
9. The school of the future
10. What would happen if we were invisible?
11. Why frogs have bulging eyes
12. The day I landed on Mars
13. If I were President
14. A girl caught in a strange, transparent bubble
15. Stories about monsters, animals, haunted houses, . . .

and so on . . .

Throughout the year, in connection with the personal writing program, the class is given instruction as a group in imagery, leading to the writing of poetry. Haiku and free verse are the most interesting vehicles for this instruction. Choral reading is also a part of this instruction in poetry. After large group choral reading, small groups of children are encouraged to practice organizing a poem of their choice for reading to the class.

ORAL COMMUNICATION

The oral communication skills should be emphasized in this or any program so that they will be more evenly balanced with the writing skills. Children should be given an opportunity to express themselves orally by reading their personal stories, reading exciting parts of library books, choral reading, one-to-one reading in teams of two for comprehension checks by teammates, informal speaking and formal speeches. Debating teams can be organized very simply in the elementary school with a simple ten-point system, with judges and timekeepers. Subjects such as space travel and its value, UFO's, homework, etc., can be very well debated. Group and individual instruction can be given in speaking, with attention to voice quality, interest, and organization. Tape recordings of debates, choral reading, and speeches are a very successful means of pointing out areas of difficulty.

All of these activities can be done independently by the children when properly introduced and guided. In *one* Language Arts class

children can be found reading for pleasure, reading for reference work, taking notes, writing a rough draft, polishing a speech, taking a spelling list from a teammate, writing poetry or a personal story. They know what is required and when, and with few exceptions the jobs are done enthusiastically and well. Specified times are set aside for oral activities, to maintain an organized systematic program. Grades are given for most assignments, and in some areas children are given a check list with comments concerning their abilities in the subject and their need for improvement.

INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES

In the conference the teacher will attempt to determine the student's comprehension, oral expression, word attack skills, and appropriateness of reading material. From findings in the meeting, she either will assist the child in developing skills individually or will assign him to a group for work on a particular skill. Records are kept on a single sheet (ditto) containing all children's names, with blocks for comments on abilities and needs and with assignments noted. One sheet per week is used and grades can easily be assessed from these sheets. It is advisable to keep one record for reading and one for writing and speaking. Contrary to rumor, record keeping in an individualized program need not be burdensome.

The first conferences of the year should be done while the child is in his seat, to promote a ripple effect among the class. Others hearing the conference will be interested and it will reduce tensions. Children may request conferences informally or on a sign-up sheet. The conference may be two minutes or ten. However, it is hoped that the teacher will see every child as frequently as possible. Once a week or more, it is a good idea to hop rapidly around the room speaking briefly to each child.

In a conference about a child's written expression, the teacher and child correct a paragraph together, noting such things as run-on sentences, sentence fragments, poor mechanics, spelling, good thoughts, and interesting new words. If ten children show a lack of knowledge about quotations, it may be that the whole class is weak in this skill. However, the entire group may not be ready to have instruction in this. Children who cannot write a complete sentence should not be included in this group for instruction.

The chief problem of the individual conference is lack of time. It is better to point out one area of need and work on this with the child than to try to teach him everything in one conference. The mere fact that he is being treated personally does much to motivate him and encourage his improvement.

INITIATING THE PROGRAM

How to begin? . . . a most important question! As mentioned previously, it is best to move slowly and individuate one area at a time—reading is the appropriate choice as the children will then have something concrete to be doing while the other areas are individualized. Most important, this should not be busy work; it should be constant, absorbing reading practice, which is essential for good reading skills and comprehension.

One should not individualize until projects are well planned or outlined in advance, and the entire group has been carefully informed of requirements of project and how to accomplish it. Projects do not have to be begun and end at the same time; staggering the work will be almost automatic because of children's varying abilities. This is an opportunity to challenge the gifted or exceptional student with assignments of graduated difficulty. Special units of work such as poetry units, debating units, sequential composition and discussion groups may be distributed during the school year, if desired.

The chief objection to a completely individualized program appears to be rooted in a fear that the teacher is not directly instructing all the children enough of the time. There is very little evidence to prove that active instruction results in learning. We are charged with instilling a love for learning in children, and we must help them learn how to learn alone. With the explosion of knowledge, we cannot possibly teach all the children all the facts, but we can teach them how to search fruitfully for knowledge above and beyond the period of formal education.